



MATTERS OF OPINION



Terry Steinwand
Director

The biggest source of conversation and concern the last few months has been the lingering drought across much of the state. Some areas are affected more seriously than others, but it is a statewide concern.

As North Dakotans, we have the responsibility to help each other when times are tough, whether it be flood or drought. I'm proud of this attitude and hope everyone helps those in need.

This is the case with many farmers and ranchers who need forage for cattle, while still considering the needs of others. Many of the state's Conservation Reserve Program acres have been opened for haying and grazing. While this isn't the absolute cure for the problem, it helps. The move isn't necessarily the best for ground-nesting birds, but it's the right thing to do given the circumstances, just as long as it's done in a reasonable and responsible manner.

While it's reasonable and responsible to help our neighbors, we also have to consider what it means to our wildlife populations. We live in this wonderful state because we choose to. I grew up here, so I understand that we'll go through periods of drought and periods of extreme moisture. Our wildlife populations have also "grown up" here and are largely able to cope, but they need adequate habitat to do so.

Saying it's reasonable to allow haying and grazing on CRP lands isn't meant to imply that 100 percent of it should be hayed or grazed. We also have some CRP in our Private Land Open To Sportsmen program. Some contracts allow for haying and grazing while others receive an incentive payment not to, but it's the landowner's choice. Bottom line, only 4 percent of the CRP PLOTS acres in drought areas cannot be hayed or grazed.

We've also received phone calls asking if we're going to open up our wildlife management areas or PLOTS lands to haying. In some instances the answer is yes, while in others it's no. We can't afford to have all wildlife habitat taken away. It's simply not reasonable or responsible.

North Dakota's wildlife is also affected by the drought, but the native species have learned to adapt if habitat is available. While I don't have a crystal ball to foresee what the fall hunting seasons hold, it is apparent deer numbers are still high across most areas of the state. That should mean another good deer hunting season.

Upland game numbers looked good going into summer. I can't remember a time when I've seen so many pheasants in my many miles of travel, but they're also affected by the drought. Young birds must have a source of precipitation, which they typically get from morning dew on vegetation. And they need insects as a food source. The low humidity may affect both, but given the resourceful and adaptive nature of the state's wildlife, they may come through mostly unharmed.

The lingering drought will likely have the largest impact on waterfowl. However, we went into spring with the 12th highest number of ducks on record in the state, based on trend information. Production and recruitment may be negatively influenced due to drought, but because of relatively high numbers of waterfowl, we may get average production for fall.

As always, during extremely dry conditions we urge caution when outdoors enjoying the fall. One careless action can destroy so much. Please be careful and take the necessary precautions – but most certainly, get out and enjoy the beauty and resources of North Dakota.

Terry Steinwand